Homily 5th Sunday of Lent 2011 - The Raising of Lazarus

Why are we reading the story of the raising of Lazarus today? What is its significance?

Some of the answers I came across while preparing this homily were:

- It gives us hope in the face of death
- It reminds us of our baptisms and our own journey from death to life
- It tells us that death is not the end
- It demonstrates how Jesus can love some of his followers more than others
- It proves that Jesus is the Messiah and that by faith in Him we have eternal life
- It shows that Jesus has power over death

All of these things may be true, but I would suggest to you that none of them are the reason for the narrative of the raising of Lazarus in John’s Gospel. The reason that John includes it in his gospel and the reason why we listen to it on the last Sunday in Lent is to prepare us for what is about to happen during Holy Week and to help us to understand why Jesus has to die.

Our reading of the story ended with the words, “Now many of the Jews who had come to Mary and seen what he had done began to believe in him,”
but it's what follows this that gives us John’s reason for including this story in his telling of the gospel:

45 Now many of the Jews who had come to Mary and seen what he had done began to believe in him. 46 But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. 47 So the chief priests and the Pharisees convened the Sanhedrin and said, "What are we going to do? This man is performing many signs. 48 If we leave him alone, all will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our land and our nation." 49 But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing, 50 nor do you consider that it is better for you that one man should die instead of the people, so that the whole nation may not perish." 51 He did not say this on his own, but since he was high priest for that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, 52 and not only for the nation, but also to gather into one the dispersed children of God. 53 So from that day on they planned to kill him.

The Synoptic gospels- Matthew, Mark and Luke- present Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple as the crucial event that pushes the religious establishment over the edge with regard to Jesus. He has prodded them, challenged them, attacked them, and humiliated them, in one way or another, for three years, and now He has undermined and subverted the Temple system- the fundamental symbol of Israel and the Jewish tradition. And so they finally decide that He has to go.

In John’s Gospel, it is the raising of Lazarus, rather than the cleansing of the Temple, that finally pushes the religious establishment over the edge.
Yet, there is a real connection between these two gospel interpretations of what pushes the story of Jesus towards its conclusion. The Pharisees and the chief priests see the stories circulating about Lazarus coming back from the dead as absolutely threatening, as something that can stir up the masses and lead to political suicide. They quickly realize after the raising of Lazarus that Jesus’ actions are pointing to a future in which everything will be changed, in which the Temple—our “holy place”—, in particular will be taken away—“the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation”, Caiaphas the high priest says.

As long as Jesus was just mucking about with peasants and the marginalized in Galilee and Samaria, He might be an annoyance, but He wasn’t overly significant. But this business with Lazarus pushes the whole thing to another level. Lazarus is not a “nobody”. One theory is that Lazarus is another name for Eleazar, the son of Boethus, a former High Priest. He is part of the upper strata of Jewish society, indicated by his burial in a large tomb. When John tells us that “the Jews” came to Bethany to mourn his death, he’s talking about the religious leadership. Lazarus, in other words, is one of them, one the elite, someone from the establishment.
And now, somehow, whatever happened, as far as the religious leaders are concerned, Lazarus has gone over to the dark side; he is witnessing to, and on the side of, the Rabbi from Nazareth. And this is very dangerous, so dangerous, in fact, that Lazarus himself must be eliminated. John tells us in the next chapter that “the chief priests planned to put Lazarus also to death, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus”.

The stakes are rising, the anxiety level is racheting up. Too much is at stake. Everything can be lost. If Jesus is allowed to continue in this fashion, the members of the Council conclude, “everyone will believe in Him” and then the Romans will destroy the place. And so the choice is clear, as far as Caiaphas the high priest is concerned: either the nation or this one Rabbi and his side-kick Lazarus. That’s the choice.

The raising of Lazarus is indeed the last and greatest wonder that Jesus will perform as a signal that the Kingdom of God has arrived in His own person, but it is also the sign of what happens when truth and power collide. Jesus has indeed undermined and subverted and reinterpreted the great symbols of first-century Judaism- the meaning of the land, the nation, the Torah, the Sabbath, and the Temple. He has transgressed the letter of
the law of Moses; he has criticized even the most holy part of the canon- or more accurately, he has claimed to interpret more purely than anybody else what the will of God is which He sees hidden within the scriptures.

Jesus has acted with a remarkable combination of both faithfulness to tradition and criticism of tradition. He is both pious and liberal, acting out both his creative acceptance of the tradition and his creative extension of the tradition into the future. He has broken the Sabbath and He has claimed a special relationship with God, which in the eyes of his enemies destroys the monotheistic faith of Israel in one God that sets Israel apart from the nations. And now by this trickery of claiming to raise Lazarus from the dead, He is unsettling the people, falsely raising their expectations that God’s Kingdom is at hand, and pushing the nation into suicide at the edge of Roman swords.

The story of the raising of Lazarus is given to us in order to push us to begin reflecting on the meaning of what we are about to enter into in Holy Week. Why must Jesus die? Why does His “obedience to God” lead to His passion and the cross?

What we already begin to see with the Lazarus event and its impact on the religious establishment is that Jesus’ own passion for truth ends up in
deadly conflict with those powers that would conceal and distort the truth. Lazarus is no longer dead- that is the truth- but it must be denied; it must be and covered up; and then Lazarus himself must be silenced! Why? So that nothing will change. So that the system can remain as it is. So that those who claim to speak for and in the name of God can retain their status and their authority.

Jesus must die because there are forces, religious forces- forces claiming to represent the very truth of God- which are, in fact, hostile and opposed to the truth. Jesus’ obedience to His Father is His fidelity, His faithfulness, to truth in conflict with the tangled web of untruth. And it is precisely by obeying the truth that Jesus obeys both the Father and the meaning, the intent, of sacred scripture. (Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, pp. 96-99).

The raising of Lazarus is pushing us towards next Sunday, Palm Sunday, when we will enter into a most bizarre, yet a most holy, space, a liminal, “in-between” time which unsettles everything, a place and a time when everything is turned topsy-turvy- what appears to be one thing is actually something quite different, where everything can change in a minute, where the one you trusted becomes your betrayer, a time when your friends walk
away, when a king acts like a slave and when God’s glory is revealed in suffering and death. It is a most bizarre, and most holy, time, a liminal time when God can work the transformation He most desires. And already today we hear the first blast and the first invitation into this very peculiar and strange and transformative “holy week”, when the Rabbi from Nazareth stands at the door of the tomb and yells into its darkness and gloom, “Lazarus, come out!”